

Similarity Guidance for Applicants

Similarity

All UCAS Undergraduate and UCAS Conservatoire personal statements are screened by our similarity detection system, Copycatch.

To prevent similarity in personal statements we warn you of the risks if you fail to provide a personal statement of your own work. We also inform you about what we do, and why we do it. Don't post your personal statement on the internet or on social media or share your personal statement with others, unless you're asking for feedback from people you trust.

There are some example personal statements on the internet that have been used by applicants, in some cases word for word. Copycatch finds statements that show similarity, works out how much of the statement may have been copied, and reports the findings. This helps admissions staff at universities and colleges judge applications, and it is the providers who decide what action, if any, to take regarding notified cases.

What the Similarity Detection Service does?

Each personal statement is compared against a library of personal statements previously submitted to UCAS, and a library of sample statements collected from websites and other sources. Each personal statement received at UCAS is added to this library after it has been processed.

What happens if a personal statement has similarities?

Any statements showing a level of similarity of greater than 30% are reviewed by members of the UCAS Verification Team. The applicant and the applicant's course providers are notified by email when an application has similarities confirmed. Universities and colleges decide what action, if any, to take regarding reported cases.

The verification process

- Copycatch identifies sentences in a personal statement that are matched to other personal statements already held in the Copycatch system.
- Levels of similarity are checked by trained staff who decide whether you and the providers you are applying to need to be informed that similarity has been found.
- The universities and colleges you are applying to decide on the significance of the results and what action, if any, to take.

- Your personal statement will not be compared to your earlier applications, if you have applied in previous cycles or schemes.

Eliminated words

The Copycatch process ignores commonly used words that many applicants use in their statements such as 'and', 'so' and 'with'.

Copycatch also ignores a selection of commonly used words and phrases such as 'Duke of Edinburgh' and 'football'.

Similarity Detection Service report

Copycatch automatically creates a colour-coded transcript showing the areas of similarity.

For those personal statements considered to contain a sufficient degree of similarity to the matched source(s), automatic emails are generated to:

- the applicant – referring them to My Application, where they will be able to view a copy of the colour-coded transcript of their personal statement
- the applicant's choice(s) – with a link to the colour-coded transcript

What the sentence colours mean in the colour-coded transcript

Red is used for the sentences from the most matched statement.

Blue is used for the next best match.

Pink is used for the third best match.

Brown is used for any other matches.

Grey is used for sentences for which no match has been found and for very short sentences, which don't get checked.

Words shown in black are words in a potentially copied sentence that are not contained in the library version of that sentence.

Words in black and underlined are words in a potentially copied sentence that are not identical to the library version of the sentence, but are similar.

Examples:

I grew up in a city near the sea and have always been fascinated by marine life.

If you had written this sentence and found it shown in red as above when you checked the Similarity Detection Service report, it would mean that it had been exactly matched to a personal statement stored in the Copycatch library.

I grew up in a town near the sea and have always found marine life fascinating.

If the sentence you had written was marked in your report like the one above, it would mean that:

- **town** and **found** were not in the matched sentence
- **fascinating** was not found as an exact match but is similar enough to the equivalent word in the matched sentence to be identified by underlining

The blue colour also shows you that the match was found in the second most matched statement.

The dates on the matched personal statements

At the bottom of the marked up personal statement, the number of sentences matched to library or internet sources is shown in the same colour as that used to mark up the sentences.

The date shows how long this personal statement has been in the UCAS collection. It does not mean that this particular statement was the one used as the source for the current personal statement.

Both may be taken from a source outside the library, or there may be other related files inside the library which have not been shown because there was no additional matched information.

The dates on the matching web sources

The number of web source sentences is shown in the same way, but here the date means either the date it was posted to the website, if known, or the date when the web source was identified by UCAS. Again, it does not necessarily mean that the file was the actual source.

As a feasibility study discovered, some web sources are very popular and may appear on more than one website or have been used in a modified form in a personal statement within the UCAS collection.

Why it works

- A personal statement of 4,000 characters will contain approximately 600 words, about half of which will be words that are eliminated from consideration (see above).
- Usually, if two personal statements are randomly selected and compared, you would expect very little or no similarity. Most sentences will be significantly different.
- This means that if Copycatch finds two sentences in different statements which have exactly the same words, it is very likely that one is a copy of the other, or that both have been copied from a third source. Of course, this can and does happen in essays if a quote from a text is included but is very unlikely to occur in a personal statement.
- If Copycatch finds several identical or similar sentences in a personal statement and a file held in the library, then a similarity report is generated.

Can an applicant replace their personal statement?

UCAS will not accept any amendments to an applicant's personal statement after the application has been submitted. We advise applicants to contact their course providers directly if they have any additional information which they wish to be considered.